

Federal legislation seeks to promote the rights of girls worldwide.

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By Betty McCollum

Long-term priorities vary for the average young girl today, but most usually include finishing school, going to college and securing a job. The options of getting married or having children are usually meant for "someday" - as they should be.

However, for millions of girls in developing countries, marriage and children are forced on them, robbing them of their health, education and, most importantly, their innocence and childhood. In many situations, girls as young as 8 years old are forced into marriages with men decades older. These girls quite often are forced to bear children before their bodies are done developing, making childbirth a life-threatening experience. Even more distressing is that the adults behind these decisions are usually the fathers, who sell their daughters as property for a meager sum or to pay off a debt.

One shocking example is Fawziya Ammodi, a young girl who lived in Yemen. Like many girls in her country, she was forced to marry at a young age. After enduring three days of painful childbirth, both she and her baby died from complications. She was only 12 years old. Although Americans may find this occurrence deplorable, it's commonplace in Yemen - a country where 48.4 percent of women under the age of 18 are married, according to the International Center for Research on Women.

Child marriage is a problem worldwide. In developing countries, an estimated 60 million girls under the age of 18 are married, and each day more than 25,000 more join them. If nothing is done to prevent child marriage, an additional 100 million girls could become child brides over the next decade.

Given away by their parents, taken advantage of by their husbands, taking care of children when they're still children themselves - what hope is there for these child brides?

Although child marriage stretches from Afghanistan to the Democratic Republic of Congo to Saudi Arabia to Yemen, there is a unique opportunity for the U.S. government to take a critical step toward ending this horrific practice.

Last year in Congress, I introduced the *International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act of 2009* (H.R. 2103) to prevent child marriage and promote the rights of girls throughout the developing world. The bill recognizes that child marriage is a human rights violation that undermines U.S. investments in foreign assistance to improve the education, health and economic status of women and girls. It also lays out a strategy for the United States to help prevent child marriage and promote the empowerment of girls everywhere. Girls will be enabled to grow, learn and pass through childhood without being forced into marriage.

I'm proud my legislation has already received bipartisan support in Congress from 81

Democrats and Republicans so far. This includes Minnesota Reps. Keith Ellison, James Oberstar and Tim Walz.

If Congress votes to make ending child marriage a priority, the United States will not be overriding any governments. In fact, these countries have already outlawed child marriage. The U.S. government would simply be dedicating resources to help enforce these bans. While child marriage prevention legislation will not solve the problem today, it provides a strong starting point for the U.S. government to make ending child marriage an integral part of our foreign policy and a realistic goal for the future.

Monday was International Women's Day. Although International Women's Day is important, protection from predatory and abusive practices must be a priority for the United States every day of the year. An end to child marriage means a positive start and a better life for millions of young girls.

*Congresswoman Betty McCollum, D-Minn., serves on the House Appropriations and Budget committees. She represents Minnesota's 4th Congressional District.*